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Community Singing as Troubled Learning: Exploring Musical, Social, and Ethical Dimensions of Safety and Risk among Adult Singers

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I work within the field of community music, teaching voice lessons to adults who are new or relatively inexperienced singers. My pedagogical aim has been to balance a tension that I see between safety and risk among my adult learners: I try to create a ‘safe’ space in which learners feel free of violation to their bodies, minds, and emotions and feel respected. At the same time, learning to sing can be challenging, often provoking personal and/or collective discomfort, disorientation, or even conflict. I have previously argued that participants can feel their learning contexts are free from violation—they can feel ‘safe’—while still feeling challenged either by the process or the content or both. I have begun to think of this pedagogical tension as a productive kind of “troubled learning,” in which learners have a foundation of trust and respect that scaffolds the discomfort experienced through the risk of exploring new content and processes (Yerichuk 2011). Along a continuum of, on the one end feeling safe and also quite comfortable, and on the other end feeling unsafe (which suggests feeling extreme discomfort), I argued that the deepest learning, this productive ‘troubled learning’ occurs somewhere in the middle in which safety is protected, but a measure of discomfort, or challenge, is present.¹

This conceptualization of troubled learning works well except when I ask: how do I ensure that every one of my learners feels both safe and challenged? Or more to the point: who decides when a participant is taking a risk and when a participant is feeling unsafe? These questions point to a fundamental problem with the concepts of ‘safety’ and ‘risk’: there is no normative experience of either. What you experience as challenging, I may experience as unsafe. The concepts of safety and risk are socially constructed, individually perceived, and can change for each individual according to context (Custadero, 2003). Given the shifting ground under individual experiences of safety and risk, how can I determine the line between safety and comfort for all of my students when that line is constantly moving? I argue that the question demands more than simply folding tactics or strategies into my pedagogical practices. Instead, the question requires fundamental shifts in how I conceptualize safety and risk along musical, ethical, and cultural dimensions.

This paper aims both to question and deepen my notions of safety and risk in working with non-professional adult singers in community settings. In short, this is my own troubled learning in grappling with issues that are both pedagogical and ethical. First, I contextualize my discussion of safety and risk by examining the ways in which a vocal learning environment, particularly a group environment, is simultaneously social and musical, which necessitates a reframing of the pedagogical issues of safety and risk. I then examine safety and risk-taking along three interdependent dimensions: musical, ethical, and cultural. Within these dimensions, I argue that considerations of safety and risk shift from procedural to functional approaches and from individual to collective responsibility for safety and risk in the group. My purpose is not to foreclose the concepts of safety and risk. Nor am I devising a definitive framework, or even at this point am I creating a set of tools to manage safety and risk-taking in community singing. In fact, my purpose is precisely the opposite: to interrogate some of my own assumptions and open up considerations of safety and risk in voice-based learning environments so that I can come at this pedagogical and ethical struggle more meaningfully.

The Socio-musical Context of Community Singing: Safety is in the Eye of the Beholder

Musical concerns often overshadow the social nature of community singing. However, community singing is simultaneously musical *and* social. Emerging research over the last decade has effectively argued that perceptions of singing are socially constructed phenomena (Chetwynd, 2006; Olson, 2005; Pascale, 1999/2001; Knight, 1999). In particular, Victoria Moon Joyce (2003; 2005) contends that adults' social experiences play a significant role in their musical anxieties, even determining whether adults view themselves as singers. White affluent North American societies construct the identity of "singer" as part of a "singer/non-singer" binary, in which most adults view themselves as non-singers. The possibility of singing invokes strong feelings of exclusion and incompetence. Joyce argues that community singing offers these adults a unique combination of belonging to a social space through musical practice, although can also provoke strong feelings of anxiety for participants learning to use their singing voices. Further, learners' musical anxieties are (socially) informed by their (multiple) subjectivities, such as 'race,' class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and ability, as well as personal musical histories. Musical anxieties arise through these socially-constituted personal musical histories.

At the same time, social relations are not simply what happens to adults before they enter the learning environment. Social relations also live *within* the learning environment, particularly in a group learning environment. A vocal learning community, as with any social learning environment, is shaped by the social relations circulating within that group, informed by multiple and unequal subjectivities such as 'race,' gender, class, ability, sexual orientation, and in the case of singing, musical competencies. Music learning environments are constituted by these social relations (Vaugois 2007), suggesting that social aspects of music-making affect how individuals in the group relate to one another in the here-and-now of community singing.

Further, social relations creep into immediate pedagogical task of singing because our bodies are, as Pierre Bourdieu (2000) argues, socialized bodies, which in turn affects our singing voices. The tensions we experience in our lives reside physiologically in our bodies and the parts of our bodies that produce or support our voices—namely, tongue, throat, larynx, shoulders, and chest cavity—are particularly susceptible to tension (Doscher 1994). When bodies experience and hold tension, that tension in turn affects voices. Social relations creep into bodies, previous experiences, musical competencies, as well as the actual learning environment. Creating learning environments in which participants feel safe to express themselves through singing is both a critical and complicated task for facilitators.

As I began to think of community singing as socially constituted, I began to question my normative conceptualization of safety, and my assumption that I can achieve a balance of safety and risk for every singer. Because individuals and groups are shaped by social relations, our perceptions of what feels safe and what feels challenging are also socially constituted. To adapt an old adage, safety is in the eye of the beholder. Given the relative interpretations of safety, the pedagogical task I have set for myself of creating a 'safe' space in which all learners feel free to take risks becomes near impossible because my students all interpret safety and risk differently, informed by their musical competencies, their experiences, and their subjectivities.

While this moving target has solutions, each solution creates its own set of problems. When I put myself in charge of the task of determining participants' balance of safety and risk, I cannot guarantee a productive kind of troubled learning for all participants, since I do not know their individual perceptions of safety and risk. One very easy solution that I have used is just to avoid any kind of work that might bring participants close to that grey area of uncomfortable and

unsafe, erring on the side of safe, and often losing any experience of challenge and growth. I sacrifice that productive kind of ‘troubled learning,’ and at worst, the participants do not feel challenged, and are not as engaged in the process. Erring on the side of safety also simply ignores the social construction of the environment, which still exist whether I address inequities or not.

Another solution is to let the learners themselves determine what feels safe and what feels challenging. This solution entrusts the decision-making with learners themselves, which feels like a more socially sensitive approach. However, this strategy makes a few problematic assumptions: first, it assumes that participants know themselves and can accurately judge when something feels unsafe and when something feels just challenging. Further and perhaps more urgently, the self-regulation of risk tolerance can benefit privileged learners who invoke a discourse of safety to avoid feeling challenged. Joyce (2003) contends this is particularly true for ‘White’ subjects, whose subject positions can make “the kinds of assumptions that enable some to expect a ‘safe’ space in which they can participate without risk or challenge to their positions of privilege” (p. 192). Second, letting learners decide their threshold assumes participants feel equally able to speak up when they feel their safety is at risk, that they can actually voice their misgivings. However, given the social constitution of the learning space, participants with marginalized subjectivities may not feel able to name their unsafe feelings or experiences within a group. Naming their vulnerability may in fact make them more vulnerable by calling attention to their difference.

I began to see that due to its social constitution, my consideration of safety in community singing isn’t merely a background condition that I can set and then move on to the content and structure of my teaching. Negotiating safety and challenge towards troubled learning is a fundamental pedagogical issue. If I pay attention exclusively to my musical learning objectives and ignore the social, I ignore the real ways in which social relations shape the musical experience. However, if I pay attention exclusively to the social milieu I can lose sight that people are attending my classes to learn how to sing. Addressing safety and risk requires more than procedural tactics or strategies: what I need is a fundamental shift in how I approach safety and risk to deepen my pedagogical practice and my ethical commitment to my singing students. In the next section, I re-orient this pedagogical struggle along three inter-dependent dimensions: musical, ethical, and cultural. These inter-connected dimensions of safety and risk reframe how I might create a safe space that invites troubled learning in, not just for my students, but also for me in my own pedagogical practice.

Musical Dimension of Safety and Risk: Safety as a Creative Process

Community singing is first and foremost a musical activity, and the musical anxieties of nascent adult singers, albeit socially constructed, are the most obvious and pertinent. Students often worry about their musical ‘ability’ and whether they have enough ‘talent’ or musical experience. They are anxious that they may make a mistake or fail. In this context, creating a safe space for risk-taking means helping adults feel they can and should be creative and musical. The musical dimension of safety and risk for nascent adult singers insists a focus on the musical task at hand, which offers a focus to orient social and pedagogical concerns. In community singing, my purpose is not dialogic education (Vella 2002) but to sing; while I want to create a socially inclusive space, I do not want to lose sight of the task of singing. This practical focus demands a technical orientation to safety and risk; however, a technical focus grounded in socio-cultural

perspective suggests that musical skills-building becomes a creative process rather than simply a procedural step prior to music-making. In the academic field of community music, Lee Higgins (2006; 2007) has theorized safety as a pedagogical framework that encourages creative freedom and growth in music learning, shifting emphasis away from a mere procedural nod towards a functional ongoing engagement with safety particular to a community-based music learning context. Higgins develops the concept of ‘safety without safety’ to call attention to the “precariousness of the creative process” (2007, p. 80). ‘Safety without safety’ points to a balance between musical safety and risk towards creativity and musical growth, in which success is achievable by creating space for the possibility of failure. His process begins not by offering simple tasks that lead from familiar into unfamiliar, but instead begins within the destabilizing unfamiliar before moving back into familiar forms of music-making. The lack of security and familiarity is replaced with a safety of “the welcome” (2008, p. 328) constantly held and re-created by the facilitator who acts as host. This shift from procedural task to functional engagement of safety suggests that a significant part of the facilitator’s role is to create and continually re-create what might be called a ‘safe space’ for adults to sing; that is, fostering learners’ abilities and willingness to be creative and musical without guaranteeing safety or success at any point in the musical process. ‘Safety without safety’ allows each participant to enter into the music-making process from their own differing experiences and abilities, while still feeling challenged and fulfilled in the music-making task at hand.

The idea of balancing musical risk and challenge is not unique to Higgins. Concerns with balancing challenge and risk in musical learning environments have been a focus for several scholars, notably David Elliott (1995; 1998), who draws substantially from the theory of flow developed by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to focus on technical skills-building for music students. For Elliott, “the emotional nature of musical experiences is essentially a matter of positive affect: enjoyment, deep satisfaction, or flow” (1995, p. 206). “Flow” is created when a learner’s musical skills are matched with her cognitive challenges, encouraging each student’s best efforts to optimize learning.

However, what distinguishes Higgins from Elliott is his specific use of the term ‘safety’ to frame pedagogical choices related to safety and risk-taking, suggesting there is something more at work in a music learning environment than creating an optimal zone between previous musical skills with new musical challenges. Musical challenge invokes a kind of risk-taking that is grounded in, but not only, technical skills-building. ‘Safety without safety’ suggests that individuals participating in the music-making have (socially formed) anxieties as well as experiences and competencies that affect the musical learning environment.

Higgins’ theorization offers two important insights in re-conceptualizing safety and risk: first, risk and opportunity are tightly held to a musical skills-building objective. While his focus on musical skills-building does not fully address the social nature of community music learning, the musical focus does offer a clear framework for shaping the learning space. Understanding safety as a concern that remains focused on music and music-making puts skills-building central to the project of enjoyable and challenging musical learning. The second important insight is that Higgins highlights the always-already precariousness of the learning context. His theory rests on the notion that the music event can never be finalized: we are always musically ‘becoming,’ emphasized through the pedagogical task of offering an unfamiliar, destabilizing music-learning process, balanced with a welcoming stance. The pedagogical task of facilitators is to create enough structure or boundaries to facilitate music-making while avoiding “too many restraints”

that “might delimit the flow or music-making” (2008, p. 331). This contingent musical learning environment insists on an ongoing engagement with safety and risk.

There are, however, limits to a predominantly musical understanding of safety and risk. While Higgins acknowledges relationships between participants as well as between facilitator and participants, ‘safety without safety’ defines safety as a creative process and a “state of mind” (2008, p. 331) obscuring the social relations circulating within and constituting the learning environment, which are often overlooked in flow theories as well (Custadero 2002, p. 5). In addition, the facilitator is clearly in charge of the space, referred to as “master” (2008, p. 328), and is therefore entirely responsible for constituting the safety of the environment. Yet, the social constructions of community singing necessitate grappling with the ways in which the social space of community singing is shaped by subjectivities among participants as much as by musical competencies, or the facilitator-participant relationship. The interaction of diverse subjectivities within music learning environments suggests that certain music learning may work well for some students, while potentially alienating others. My pedagogical choices of process, content, and structures affect how students engage from their (multiple) subjectivities. From a socio-cultural perspective, my considerations of safety and risk have a strong ethical dimension, as well as a musical dimension.

Ethical Dimension: Approaching Safety and Risk with a Love Ethic

In grappling with the ethical dimension of safety and risk, my thinking has been influenced largely by the scholarship of bell hooks. Hooks is best known for developing ‘engaged pedagogy,’ which is largely informed by Paulo Freire’s model of popular education (1970), as well feminism and critical race studies. In my examination of safety and risk, hooks’ concept of *love ethic* profoundly reframes how I might create a safe space that invites troubled learning in, not just for my students but also for my pedagogical practices. Her work reorients the issues I have discussed along three dimensions: (1) considerations of safety and risk reorients from strictly pedagogical towards ethical considerations; (2) considerations of safety and risk reorient from purely individual towards collective constructions; and (3) negotiating safety reorients from structural approach (creating a safe space in which we then do the work) towards functional approach (helping students cope with risky situations and feelings as they arise).

While hooks has written extensively about love since 2000, her more recent work discusses love in the context of the classroom. Rather than being irrelevant, she contends that love is central to education. Hooks argues that love is an action rather than something that people fall into: love is something that we do. Hooks describes love as “the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth” (2000, p. 6). A love ethic is defined as the utilization of “all the dimensions of love—‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge’ (2000, p. 94). These six dimensions transform any educational effort from a sole focus on technical skills-building towards teaching the whole student from a strong ethical standpoint. A love ethic is extremely useful in community singing, where the work is vulnerable and the relationships are unequal, particularly the student-teacher relationship. While my goal is always musical skills building, these dimensions of love help me address both musical and social anxieties and challenges within the musical work for each individual student. Hooks argues that a love ethic connects the unique needs of individual students to the greater classroom community, contending that:

...when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students, while simultaneously integrating those concerns into the classroom community. (hooks 2010, p. 160)

Hooks demands educators to ground their pedagogical work in the unique concerns of individual students. Rather than establishing and following a set of rules, educators are responding to unique and shifting needs of individuals, which bears some resemblance to Higgins' 'welcome' for participants.

At the same time, hooks moves away from an exclusively individual focus towards fostering a collective environment that seeks to balance challenge and safety. The dimensions of love (care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge) are not exercised exclusively by the facilitator, but are principles for each participant to follow as well. The concept of safety shifts from a prioritization of individuals or even as a transaction between student and teacher towards a community focus in which all participants and the facilitator bear responsibility for creating the space and taking risks. Knowledge, for example, is located not only with the educator; participants' self-knowledge and the collective knowledge are valued components of the learning space. Similarly, commitment and responsibility are expected not just of the facilitator but also the participants. The group works together and members are responsible to and for each other, shifting relationships from a self-interested individualist stance to a caring communal process.

Trust is foundational to creating this communal process, the real scaffolding that enables participants to enter into challenging learning and possible conflict. Hooks (2010) defines trust among students as:

...having confidence in one's own and another person's ability to take care, to be mindful of one another's well-being. Choosing to trust, to be mindful, requires then that we think carefully about what we say and how we say it, considering as well the impact of our words on fellow listeners. (p. 87)

Within this new orientation towards collective responsibility to the collective, my role as facilitator or teacher also shifts away from guaranteeing participants' safety and learning needs, and moves towards working with my participants to develop a *collective* responsibility for the well-being of the group.

Finally, hooks reframes the concept of safety and risk altogether. In fact, she clearly dislikes the term 'safety,' arguing that the word is mostly used to avoid conflict. From her perspective, keeping a group safe often means only sticking with topics and tasks in which everyone agrees or ensuring simply that everyone gets equal time in a learning environment. Hooks contends that an emphasis on safety can actually act as a barrier to meaningful learning. Instead, she maintains the need for increased risk-taking in classrooms, and invites conflict into learning contexts. The presence of conflict is not necessarily negative; instead, conflict is defined by how the group copes with it. Hooks maintains that "...one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe" (2010, p. 64).

It is important to note here that hooks theorizes a primarily non-artistic educational environment, one in which issues of classism, sexism, and racism are discussed directly as the purpose of the learning. In other words, musical skills-building is not her *modus operandi*. However, integrating a love ethic into Higgins' music-focused theorization of safety without

safety offers a more robust reconceptualization of safety in a community singing context that holds the dove-tailed concerns of music and social. Similar to Higgins, hooks' shifts the focus from a structural or procedural concern to a functional adaptive approach. Instead of creating a safe space before the work begins and then doing the work inside that space, the focus now orients towards helping learners develop tools to deal with situations of risk, both social and musical. The negotiation of safety and risk becomes an ongoing process. By learning how to cope with risk, "we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict" (hooks 2010, 87). Troubled learning requires my commitment as a teacher but it also requires each student's commitment to engage with risk in ways that may not feel safe. We hold safety and challenge together, and we each of us make the choice to hold safety and challenge.

This definition of safety understands learning as troubled, no doubt about it, but it is a celebrated struggle, and a necessary one if my educational goals are holistic rather than transactional. What is helpful about this reconceptualization of safety is that my challenge as a singing facilitator, contrary to my starting definition of safety, is no longer about keeping everyone from the possibility of harm, but instead my challenge is now to help participants gain the tools to be able to cope with risks that come up in challenging situations. I do not suggest that this reconceptualization solves a problem or renders the task easy, but it does enable me to struggle with the question more meaningfully.

I have explored how bell hooks' concept of a love ethic might deepen the musical dimension of balancing safety and risk to encourage troubled learning in productive and socially mindful ways. I would like to finish by touching on a different perspective of troubled learning that shifts the ground yet again around cultural assumptions.

Cultural Dimension: Interrogating Western Constructions of Safety in Group Learning

In 2009, Mary Copland Kennedy wrote an article detailing her experience as a participant in a First Nations course offered through the University of Victoria on the West Coast of Canada. The course was called *Earthsongs* and drew from several different Aboriginal cultures and teachers to lead the group through creating instruments and songs using materials from local tribes. In particular, I was struck by her description of the "Lil'wat teaching and learning principles" that guided the class. "Lil'Wat" refers to the Lil'wat Nation, of the Interior Salish People, and the principles are given in Ucwalmicwts, which is the language of the Interior Salish People. Let me be clear that I neither purport to be an expert, nor do I suggest simply taking these principles and start applying them without fully investigating the cultural context that gave rise to them. However, by virtue of coming from the Lil'wat Nation, the principles offer a distinctive cultural shift in thinking about learning and teaching that underscore the Western assumptions of the other theories, including my own, even while those theories are striving towards a more socially equitable and inclusive learning space.

Kennedy lists nine principles in the appendix, and some principles share some similarities with the theories of Higgins and hooks. For example, the principle of *cwelelep* asks learners to experience dissonance, "spinning like a dust storm" (2008, p. 180), which echoes both theorists' calls for discomfort although suggests that what students experience may move well beyond discomfort: they may be completely disoriented. The principle of *A7xekcal* points to the teachers' roles in locating "the infinite capacity we all have as learners" while "developing one's own personal gifts and expertise in a holistic, respectful and balanced manner" (p. 180),

somewhat similar to Higgins' assertion that the facilitator holds the gift of the welcome, although this principle points to the individual's role and attitude within that relationship.

As I read through the principles, I was struck with the difficult and complex descriptions of each term, in marked contradistinction from the other theorists. Many of the principles take several sentences to try to capture the meaning. There is no word in English that can adequately translate *Kamucwkalha*, which is translated as "[t]he felt energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose. Group is ready to work together, to listen to one another and speak without fear" (p. 180). I keep rereading these principles, and need to think through what they might mean. Some principles are similar to each other, yet ask different tasks of learners. For example, *Emhaka* and *Responsibility* both call for personal presence and good will but in different ways: the first calls for each learner to contribute what they can and help the community; the second asks for participation in the community "clear of anger and impatience" (180). Unlike bell hooks' list of words for a love ethic, such as "care, trust, commitment, responsibility" in which English-speaking facilitators have some instant attachment to what those words might mean, these principles require us as teachers and as learners to think a little harder about the principles themselves and how we might engage with the work at hand.

The principles also shift from Western individualist understandings of safety and risk towards a priority of the collective within group learning. While Higgins tended to prioritize the individual learner as well as the 'master' facilitator, and hooks grappled with the relationship between individual and collective, the Lil'wat principles suggest that the individual has a duty towards the collective, to be open to learning, to be generous, and to share what knowledge/ideas they have. The collective is prioritized to the extent that any individuals who withhold knowledge in fact weaken the group (2008, p. 180). In this particular context, the goal is not about creating a space in which adults are invited or encouraged to be subjects of their own learning. Participants are expected to give all they have. This is not an invitation; it is an obligation to the group.

The relationship to conflict also appears to shift slightly, particularly from the conceptualization of conflict that hooks puts forward. The principles suggest that each person might experience internal turmoil through the learning process, yet the principle of *Responsibility* demands participants to enter into the space positively. Conflict and good will each appear to have significant roles in creating the learning space, a relationship that is more clearly seen in the principle of *Watchful Listening*. Watchful listening insists that we are responsible for ourselves, but we cannot stay only in ourselves. We move past our own experiences and thoughts to open awareness of "everything around us" (p. 180) as we work on our tasks.

The Lil'wat Principles of Teaching and Learning require a re-examination of the cultural assumptions that underpin any considerations of negotiating safety and risk in the classroom, and in particular call attention to the Western assumption that individual experiences take priority within a learning environment. The Principles also demand conscious thinking and even deliberate struggling with how facilitators and participants alike engage with each other, with ourselves, and with the material. These Principles put the social to the forefront of the learning environment, opening up considerations of safety and risk that might connect musical ends with the personal and the collective through an ethical commitment to trust and engage with people, processes, content, and structures.

**Opening Up Safety and Risk:
Musical, Ethical and Cultural Encounters in Community Singing**

Negotiating a balance between safety and risk from a socio-cultural standpoint is critical to a musical learning process that recognizes the simultaneous social and musical character of community singing. Since safety and risk are socially produced and individually perceived, I cannot guarantee a balance of safety and risk, or troubled learning, for all participants. However, while safety cannot be guaranteed, the continued struggle invites me to deepen my theoretical groundings and my practice. Shifting the question from individual to the collective and from the teacher to the community may provide a more meaningful engagement with the challenge of safety and risk in community singing environments. While there are many strategies for holding safety and encouraging risk, I have argued that a fundamental shift in how we think of safety and risk deepens our pedagogical practice and our ethical commitment to our singing students. Negotiating safety and risk is not just a pedagogical struggle; it is an ethical struggle. Negotiating safety and risk is not just a musical struggle; it is a social struggle. Negotiating safety and risk is not just an individual or teacher struggle; it is a collective struggle. These struggles are held along musical, ethical, and cultural dimensions, which significantly reframe approaches to safety and risk within community singing.

The wonder of a group singing context is that this struggle to balance perceptions and experiences within the group all happens in the context of participants literally finding and using their own voices in relation to each other. While I in no way suggest that singing overcomes or even reveals all differences, I believe that community singing can become a site of joyous struggle, grounded in a love ethic, in which we can acknowledge and grapple with these internal and collective tensions while still feeling connected to ourselves and our fellow singers.

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¹ This is similar to the optimal learning space described by Canadian scholar and community music educator Victoria Moon Joyce as 'just beyond the comfort zone,' located between the comfort zone and the 'way beyond the comfort zone.' The 'just beyond the comfort zone' where there is energy and attention but not paralysis. (Taken from notes from a Song-Leading Workshop with Joyce, February 1, 2004)